

American Presbyterian History

Week 6 – National Reorganization & Westward Expansion Trinity Presbyterian Church

1. Reorganization into the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.
 - a. The **Plan of Union of 1758** had reunited the Presbyterian church under the name of the **“Synod of New York and Philadelphia”**.
 - b. After the Revolutionary War, the Presbyterian church found that it’s continued growth required some reorganization. Contemporary with the formation and ratification of U.S. Constitution, and a growing sense of national unity for our new country, Presbyterians were also considering their organization, as well as desiring a more national identity.
 - c. During this reorganization, the church made several changes to their constitution.
 - i. **Westminster Standards**: Made modifications consistent with the original concerns mentioned in the Adopting Acts of 1729 about the civil magistrate.
 - ii. Revised the **“Plan of Government”** and **“Directory for Public Worship”**.
 - iii. The Synod of New York and Philadelphia ratified these changes in 1788.
 - d. In 1789, the first General Assembly convened in Philadelphia, officially forming the **Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.**
 - i. John Witherspoon, a Founding Father of the United States, was the moderator of the first General Assembly.
 - ii. It consisted of 419 congregations, 111 licentiates, 177 ministers, 16 presbyteries, and 4 synods (Philadelphia, New York and New Jersey, Virginia, and the Carolinas).
 - e. Presbyterians were generally strong supporters of America’s independence, but also of the separation of church and state. How does this speak to contemporary concerns?
2. Westward Expansion
 - a. At the start of the 1800s, there was continued need for ministers, especially in evangelizing and church planting in the American frontier.
 - b. The **Plan of Union of 1801** was enacted between New England Congregationalist churches and the Presbyterian Church to provide formal cooperation in the frontier.
 - i. New churches had to accommodate both Presbyterians and Congregationalists.
 - ii. Allowed for churches to employ ministers from the other denomination.
 - iii. In case of conflict with the pastor, his affiliation would determine the recourse.
 - iv. In case of discipline for a member, their affiliation would dictate the process.
 - v. New congregations were given the choice of whether the church itself would identify as Presbyterian or Congregationalist.



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- c. Working with the New England Congregationalists proved challenging.
 - i. At first, many thought that New England Congregationalists generally shared the Calvinistic theology of the Presbyterians, but differed only on church government. In other words, differences were often perceived to be minimal.
 - ii. However, in practice the New England Congregationalists tended to be much more free thinkers, often with some rationalistic tendencies. Their dominant school of thinking became known as **New England Theology** which went through several stages, producing systems of theology such as the **New Divinity** and **New Haven Theology**, which redefined several important doctrines including original sin and the nature of the atonement.
 - iii. Without allegiance to any confession like the Presbyterians had, the New England Congregationalists seemed more free to explore novel, and unfortunately unbiblical, theological ideas.
- d. As time went on, the merit of the Plan of Union became a point of division among Presbyterians, which in part contributed to the **Old School – New School Controversy**, resulting in a temporary split in the church (to be discussed in two weeks). The Plan was ended in 1837 by the Old School, and in 1852 among the New School.
- e. Reflection on the Plan of Union
 - i. Evaluate the slogan "doctrine divides but ministry unites" in light of this history.
 - ii. How does this speak to modern ecumenical issues?
- f. Presbyterian Missions in Contrast to the Approach of the Baptists and Methodists
 - i. One of the problems that the Plan of Union sought to address was to make sure Presbyterians had properly educated clergy.
 - ii. However, Baptists and Methodists effectively employed large numbers of lay preachers who typically had no college or seminary education.
 - 1. Baptists and Methodists quickly overtook the western frontier of America with new churches, and we still see the effects of this today.
 - 2. For example, Methodists grew from 300 members in 1771 to over 200,000 in 1816. By 1820, Presbyterians had only 72,096 members.
 - iii. Which strategy is best?

Next Week... Revivalism